

## Tracking the History of Nonnormative Female Sexualities in Western European Literature from 1670-1835

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This summer, I read a multitude of texts from the long eighteenth century, focusing on primary sources that supplied essential representations of the transgression of female sexual norms. The eighteenth century is significant in literary representations of sexuality as it stands as a threshold just before the emergence of modern understandings of sexuality. During this period, the definitions of nonnormative sexualities and their depictions in literature began to transform in what Foucault describes as “a discursive ferment that gathered momentum from the eighteenth century onward” (18). I aimed to evaluate general assumptions of the supposedly repressive and condemning discourse concerning female sex, sexuality, and desire during this period and to discover the cultural and emotional significance of acts and individuals that seem condemned in literature and life. By staging my focus on the female experience, I explored topics such as female same-sex relations, the female orgasm, and nonnormative gender identities.

At the end of the summer, I wrote a twenty-five-page essay entitled, *Desacralizing the Mother Goddess: Anti-Maternalist and Queer Readings of Eighteenth-Century British and French Literature in a Post-Roe Era*, in which I analyzed texts from four of the authors I read—the Marquis de Sade, Charlotte Dacre, Denis Diderot, and Daniel Defoe—and their radically anti-maternalist and queer understanding of female sexuality. This paper was based on a concept I discovered in Angela Carter’s book, *The Sadeian Woman*, in which she argues for the destruction of the myth of the “mother goddess.” All of these authors, in different ways, recognized what is really at stake for an anti-maternalist understanding of women—an understanding that frees women from the false cultural duties forced onto their bodies: the singular way to emancipate women from defining themselves through their fertility is to affirm and embrace women’s sexuality.

For example, in Sade’s colossal novel *Juliette* (1797), Juliette’s constant pleasure in non-vaginal intercourse overturns the patriarchal myth of the mother goddess by denying it her womb. With his merciless destruction of sexual relations, Sade allows us to reimagine sex in a way that is more liberating to women. Charlotte Dacre’s gothic novel, *Zofloya, or, The Moor* (1806), contains mother-hatred and religious critique similar to that of Sade. By refusing to adhere to codes of chastity and feminine virtue, Victoria, the novel’s heroine (or anti-heroine), maintains autonomy and rejects the legal and social codes of a heteronormative society that would subject and limit her. The novel also positions Victoria as queer in both her gender nonconformity and her possible sexual desires for women. So by inverting her femininity, Victoria queers the motherly goddess, thus killing her myth. Denis Diderot uses the Church as a playground for studying the same-sex world in his novel, *The Nun* (1792). As a fervent atheist, Diderot mocks the institution of religion and its belligerent ignorance, expanding the danger of sanctification to more than just the Virgin Mary or the mother goddess. Diderot’s examples of abusive religious coercion due to the sanctification of institutionalized religion show that the sanctification of anything gives power to some and denies it to others. Lastly, Daniel Defoe’s *Roxana: Or, The Fortunate Mistress*, published in 1724, follows Roxana, at first an abandoned wife, who sacrifices her “virtue” (in other words, has sex out of marriage), in order to survive. Roxana soon realizes that being a mistress allows her autonomy—personal, sexual, and monetary—that she could never have as a wife. Defoe promotes a religion that allows both spiritual independence and sexual privacy—a Hegelian resolution that combines an independent relationship with God and an autonomy of sexuality.

This paper was especially meaningful to me. Throughout the paper, I connect my argument to today’s political landscape, especially to the 2022 Supreme Court ruling *Dobbs v. Jackson*. The regressive laws that have been instituted in the United States over the past two years, stemming from the hyper-religious, semi-fascist portion of the modern Republican party, actively disenfranchise women and the LGBTQ+ community. Through my textual analysis, I argue that the absolute sanctification of anything—whether myth, person, or ideology—inevitably causes injustices and limits personal autonomy. The texts from the eighteenth century argued for a world that is anti-maternalist and queer, and they offer multiple different ways in which women can free themselves from the restraining ideology of the mother goddess—women’s identities, hobbies, sexual enjoyment, and fundamental right to live as autonomous human beings are independent of their reproductive ability to bear children. By identifying the anti-maternalization and desacralization in these works, even those as violent towards women as Sade, we can understand just how regressive and unfounded current political legislation is. A sacred woman is a constrained and, inevitably, oppressed woman.

**Faculty Mentor: Professor David Collings**

**Funded by the Martha Reed Coles Summer Fellowship**

**References:**

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